

FRENCH MANUSCRIPTS REFERRING TO THE TASMANIAN ABORIGINES

A PRELIMINARY REPORT

by

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Of the descriptions of the living Tasmanians, those by the voyagers who saw them before the settling of that island are the most complete. It can be said with some truth that these few travellers, whose observations cover only a few months of time, recorded as much or more of scientific value than the settlers occupying Tasmania during the seventy or so years that the aborigines survived among them, the one exception among the latter being George Augustus Robinson. This failure to observe arose from lack of interest in the natives: the settlers' one thought was to rid themselves of the aborigines, whom they considered anyway to be less than human. Even Joseph Milligan, who was both medically qualified and interested in the natural sciences, recorded little more than a vocabulary, yet he was in charge of the remnant of the people for more than ten years and had seen them in their natural state while a medical officer on the staff of the Van Diemen's Land Company.

The Pacific was the last great region of the earth to be explored by Europeans and, when its exploration became active during the second half of the 18th century, the surrounding lands were already well known and if not ruled by European powers, had European merchants controlling their foreign trade. Thus, the Spaniards firmly ruled the western shores of South America and were also established on the Pacific coast of North America and in the Philippines; the Dutch controlled much of the East Indies; and the British, the French and the Portuguese had various establishments on the Asiatic mainland.

When the great era of Pacific exploration began about 1760, the French and British competed for possession of the Pacific lands. Others had come either too early to consolidate their possession of the lands they discovered, as did the Spaniards to Fiji; or too late, as did the Russians, for the French and British had already acquired everything worth having. In the Pacific, as elsewhere, the reason for geographical exploration was primarily trade, but to be able to trade in safety political influence had to follow in greater or less degree.

There was an important difference in emphasis in the conduct of the French and British expeditions: the making of observations in the natural sciences was of great interest to both nations, but while the British were content to rely on rather piecemeal methods for obtaining such information, the French made such research an integral part of the organisation of their expeditions and appointed special staffs to undertake it. Of all the British voyages to the Pacific in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, only those of Cook involved active participation by a national scientific body, the Royal Society, and even then few naturalists took part in the expeditions — Banks, Solander and the Forsters. There were other British voyages or explorations of which

the naturalist was an important member (e.g. Robert Brown's association with Flinders), or which concerned the natural sciences (e.g. Bligh's expeditions to transplant the breadfruit tree); but these have to be contrasted with the well organised scientific work which was an integral part of the expeditions sent out by the French. Of course, because exploration meant the drawing of accurate charts and obtaining astronomical, meteorological and oceanographic information for the use of the seamen who would follow the routes later, the ships of both countries had well trained chart makers and nautical observers on board. But there the British largely let the matter rest. The technology of life at sea was of supreme importance, but science was something for the dilettante.

ORGANISATION OF THE FRENCH MARINE EXPEDITIONS

By the beginning of the era of Pacific exploration, the French had begun to organise their marine exploring expeditions along two very definite lines. Expeditions were perhaps primarily the concern of the navy, officers and crews being naval men, and the ships being supplied, equipped and provisioned by the navy; but the scientific organisation of an expedition was no less important. In fact, the initial moves to promote an expedition seem to have been a combined approach to the administration from both the *Institute of France**, which represented scientific interests, and those sections of government which were concerned with the advancement of political interests. And just as the navy had more or less a routine for equipping the vessels and appointing the officers and crews, so had the Institute and the Museum of Natural History in regard to the organisation of the scientific work.

The practical part played by the Institute and Museum was twofold. They recommended to the Minister of Marine the names of the savants who should be sent on an expedition, but they also planned the work these men should do. In the matter of appointments, at least of the more junior members, little was left to chance. The Museum seems to have recruited "traveller naturalists" from time to time (perhaps even annually). These were young men with knowledge of the natural sciences, having studied botany, zoology or mineralogy; and perhaps having received their training in Paris, perhaps in one of the provincial centres. Those recruited were sent out with expeditions formed to explore by land or by sea, in junior positions at first; and among them are to be found the names of many of those who were to become famous in one or other branch of natural

* In referring to the Institute of France I mean that body literally in the earliest years; but gradually the responsibility was taken from the parent by the Museum of Natural History in Paris (which included the *Jardin des Plantes*).

science. There is a continuity in all this which is such an advantage in research: we find, for example, that the gardener Riédle who died during the course of Baudin's expedition of 1800-1804, had already accompanied him as gardener on an expedition to the West Indies in 1796; and that La Haye, who was gardener on D'Entrecasteaux's expedition, had earlier been to Isle de France (Mauritius) where he had collected plants.

The other way in which the Institute was concerned in the planning of an expedition was in the organisation of a programme of work for each of the scientists, the various professors at the Natural History Museum and Jardin des Plantes drawing up their instructions and indicating what specimens were wanted particularly. It is only necessary to glance at some of the records to see what immense quantities of specimens were brought back to France from these expeditions.

Once appointed as members of an expedition, the scientists themselves appear to have selected the equipment they would be likely to need on the voyage, and this equipment was of such variety as to permit wide activities. Books and charts were also supplied, the books including not only the accounts of other travellers but also floras, monographs dealing with natural history, anatomy, chemistry and physics, mineralogy and so on.

MANUSCRIPT RECORDS RELATING TO THE EXPEDITIONS

The main object of the preliminary survey undertaken in 1965 was to locate manuscripts recording observations made in the field on the living Tasmanians, it being hoped that such records might contain details not found in the published accounts of the expeditions. Attention was directed to public records rather than to those in private possession, the former being the more accessible; and those collections were examined particularly which seemed likely to contain observations made by the naval personnel or by the scientists accompanying expeditions which visited Tasmania before the era of British settlement, when the aborigines were in their natural state.

The records of these expeditions fall into two groups, the official naval records, and those of the scientists; and while the naval records are generally complete, those of the scientists are very incomplete or are now lost. The relative completeness of the naval records is no doubt due to regulations which ensured that all journals kept by members of a ship's company were deposited in the official archives. Thus, on the voyage of D'Entrecasteaux journals of one sort or another were kept not only by the senior officers but also by the apprentices and even by some members of the crew; and these are to be found in the naval archives. While many of the accounts deal only with details of weather and navigation, some describe events when the ships were at anchor.

With the scientists' records the situation was very different: once the results of the voyage had been written up and the specimens collected had been described, the original records were no longer considered of any value and were discarded. For any of the original records to survive would therefore be a matter of chance, even when the scientist had an official position in a museum or other institution, a state of affairs which is little different even today. The results of an intensive search for original scientific records are in accord with this view, and few relating to the voyages to be described hereafter have been located, even among the archives of the Museum of Natural History in Paris, those found being incomplete and their subject and content quite unpredictable, worthless scribble being as

likely to be preserved as material of the greatest value.

On the earlier expeditions, the association between scientists and seamen seems to have been very close, but by the time of the later expeditions their work was much more separate, that of the scientists having become so specialised technologically that it was now difficult for others to appreciate it. With the earlier expeditions, the shore parties engaged in exploration appear to have included both seamen and scientists, but on the later expeditions their visits to the land were largely independent. This means that the loss of the scientists' records can in some degree be made good for the earlier expeditions, but that with the later expeditions little information on scientific matters can be obtained from the records of the seamen. In anthropology, which did not become systematised until so much later than botany and zoology, there was little more than a recording of observations on the customs and productions of the various native races, so that any trained observer might be expected to notice somewhat the same things, and the differences between the records made by the scientists and the seamen would be likely to depend mainly on their relative opportunities for making observations. Thus, some of the more detailed naval records made during the voyage of D'Entrecasteaux were probably not very different from those of the scientists on board, and they can therefore be expected to yield information supplementing the published accounts, whereas in the absence of a close association between the two groups by the time of Baudin's expedition, much less supplementary information is likely to be forthcoming from the naval records.

THE FRENCH EXPEDITIONS VISITING TASMANIA

Marion du Fresne (1772)

Although Tasman had landed on the south-east coast of Van Diemen's Land in 1642 he did not see the natives — he found plenty of evidence that the place was inhabited — and the first Europeans to make contact with the Tasmanian aborigines were members of Marion du Fresne's expedition who visited Tasmania for a few days in March 1772, hoping to replenish their supply of fresh water and obtain spars for the ships. The vessels anchored in the same area as Tasman's had 130 years earlier. During the visit the voyagers met a party of natives. The meeting was at first amicable, but later relations changed, the natives attacking the French with spears and stones, who in response to this opened fire, killing one native and wounding others.

Marion's expedition differed very much from later French expeditions to the Pacific. In the first place, his expedition was largely a private commercial venture, being supported but not controlled by the government; and in the second, the vessels were equipped and provisioned and the crews recruited at Isle de France. For these reasons, a scientific staff did not accompany the expedition. Government aid was obtained partly because the objects of the expedition were discovery and trade, and partly — and this was the official reason for giving support — because Marion du Fresne was to take back to his home a Tahitian named Pontaveri (Aoutourou) who had been brought to Isle de France by Bougainville in 1768 and was anxious to return to his own country. The expedition had only reached Isle Bourbon (Réunion) when Pontaveri became ill with smallpox, and he died shortly afterwards at Madagascar, where Marion had landed him. Pontaveri's death did not lead to the abandoning of the expedition: Marion decided to continue it in the hope of making useful discoveries.

An account of Marion's expedition was published in 1783 by Ronchon, an astronomer and member of the Institut de France, using the records of the expedition, and it is important to note that Ronchon had not accompanied it. Moreover, Ronchon could draw only on the information gathered by seamen, there being no scientists on board. This may not have led to many differences in a period when the natural sciences were still largely the province of the amateur and when anthropology in particular had not developed beyond the recording of casual observations, but at least there was a difference in outlook between the practical needs of the seamen and the disinterested scientific study of nature.

There are two series of documents dealing with Marion's voyage in the archives of the Ministry of Marine, and these include the journals of the principal officers of the two ships. From these accounts it is possible to build up a fairly detailed picture of what happened during the meeting with the natives. It differs to some extent from the account given by Ronchon, particularly in regard to the motives which led the natives to attack Marion's party, and it becomes clear that the latter was not attacked on account of any infringement of ceremonial on landing, but solely because the large number of French arriving from the ships led the natives to fear for their safety. The firebrand handed to Marion supposedly to light a ceremonial fire was one given him to warm himself, just as the seamen who had swum ashore earlier to help the landing from the boats were handed firebrands on reaching the shore, according to the custom of the natives.

From the descriptions of the natives generally, and from the report of the examination of the body of the native who was shot, some useful information can be obtained about the aborigines. In particular, the height of the dead man was measured (170.5 cm), and the colour of his skin noted (dark brown). The latter observation is of interest because something was done which few others did: the body was washed, so that the natural skin colour could be seen, unobscured by the charcoal and other substances with which the aborigines often bedaubed themselves, and by dirt.

D'Entrecasteaux (1792/93)

D'Entrecasteaux visited Van Diemen's Land twice during the progress of his expedition in search of La Pérouse, the first time being in April and May 1792 and the second in January and February 1793, spending altogether about ten weeks in south-eastern Tasmania. The scientific staff on the ships was impressive — five naturalists and two astronomers — not to mention the surgeons of the two ships, and two geographers (chart makers), two draughtsmen, and a gardener. Two accounts of the voyage were published, the more official one by Rossel an officer on the *Recherche*, and the other by Labillardière one of the naturalists. There is a great deal of archival material relating to this expedition, chiefly in the Marine archives, but also in the library of the Natural History Museum in Paris and elsewhere. The naval records are extensive and contain a number of the journals kept by the officers of the expedition, but, generally speaking, the records made by the scientists no longer exist.

A detailed analysis of these records has not yet been undertaken, but a few comments can be made at this stage. Some attention has been given to the medical records of the expedition, since it is now known that introduced European disease was an important factor in the extinction of the Tasmanians. During their stay the French had sufficient contact with the natives perhaps to transmit infection to them, so that by the time

settlement began there may have been already a diminution in numbers of the aborigines due to epidemic disease. The medical records certainly show that there was disease of one sort or another among the crews of the ships, both acquired in France and in ports visited during the voyage — fevers, smallpox, dysentery and so on — but this by no means proves that it was transmitted to the natives, only that there was the opportunity for this.

Two sets of measurements on the living body are listed by D'auribeau, lieutenant de vaisseau on the *Recherche*. Unfortunately only one male and one female were measured, but the measurements are the only ones known apart from some made at the Flinders Island aboriginal settlement. Of course, others have measured stature (e.g. Marion du Fresne and Péron), but D'auribeau is the only one to give other measurements of the body.

Data have also been found on sex and age distribution among the members of a group of 48 persons, evidently a horde. The adults comprised ten men and fourteen women; and there were twenty-four children. The excess of females over males should be noted, Labillardière also having observed a similar disproportion and found evidence for polygamy. However, the condition observed may not have been a normal one because where more than one female was associated with a male at a cooking fire, only one of the females seemed to be the man's wife, the other being ignored by him.

Other matters dealt with in the various journals are the customs of the natives; their canoe-rafts; vocabulary. It is clear that anthropological material was collected in Tasmania, but none of it is known to exist now. Piron's original drawings have been located: they show a number of details, particularly those of the adornment of the body, which are not clear in the published engravings.

Baudin (1802)

The third French expedition to visit Tasmania before 1803 was that led by Baudin. Again we find the detailed scientific planning and the large and competent party of savants — five zoologists, three botanists, two mineralogists and two astronomers — as well as two cartographers, artists and gardeners. The results of the voyage were edited by François Péron (completed after his death by Louis Freycinet), and the text was accompanied by a number of very fine plates based on the work of the artists Petit and Lesueur.

Archives of the Baudin expedition are to be found in a number of repositories, the most important being those in the Marine archives, in the library of the Museum of Natural History in Paris, and in the Museum of Natural History at Le Havre. Again we find that the naval records are much more complete than the scientists' records; but here unfortunately it is not possible to fill the gaps in the latter with the observations recorded by the seamen. One gets the impression that while ships' companies and savants often visited the shore together during the D'Entrecasteaux expedition, they kept much more apart during the Baudin expedition. Moreover, the natural sciences had now developed so far that the scope of scientific observation was beyond the capabilities of the seamen, whose observations though exact were more superficial than those of the men trained in the natural sciences. Loss of a large part of the field records of the scientists means that there is less to fall back on in trying to make good deficiencies in the published record. Anthropological field data seem hardly to exist and the one hope is that detailed analysis of other

papers will bring to light information of value. A number of Péron's manuscripts are in the Lesueur collection at Le Havre, but few of them refer to Tasmanian anthropology (and the most important of these is badly mutilated). Another of Péron's anthropological manuscripts is in the library of the Faculty of Medicine in Paris but, like those at Le Havre, seems to be a draft for the published account of the voyage rather than an original field record. By far the most important anthropological material is the collection at Le Havre of watercolours painted by Petit and Lesueur (listed in the little known paper by Hamy, 1891), among which are several unpublished portraits and scenes.

Dumont D'Urville (1827/28)

Over twenty-five years elapsed between Baudin's visit and that of Dumont D'Urville in the *Astrolabe*, and by then there were no longer opportunities for studying the aborigines in their natural state. Moreover, the members of the expedition hardly went beyond the environs of Hobart, as was generally the case with later expeditions also.

The *Astrolabe* arrived at Hobart on 17 December 1827 and left on 5 January 1828. No reports of anthropological interest relating to this period have been found, either in the Marine archives or in the records of the scientific and medical staffs, but there is interesting material concerning the sealers and their Tasmanian native women whom the visitors had met in November and December 1826. At King Georges Sound (Western Australia) a vocabulary was obtained from one of these women, a native of Port Dalrymple, and part of the original of this has been found in the Marine archives. This contains some differences from the published vocabulary, and of course not all the words are Tasmanian but some had an external origin.

A Tasmanian cranium brought back by the expedition is now in the collections of the Musée de l'Homme (Reg. No. 972).

Laplace (1831)

Laplace reached Hobart in the *Favorite* on 8 July 1831 and left a month later, on 7 August. There are no reports on the living natives, and at this time there may not even have been any captives in the gaol at Hobart. However, Eydoux the surgeon may have seen one ill in the colonial hospital, because one of the trophies of the visit was the preserved head of an aboriginal, which was probably obtained from the hospital. This head was described superficially by Dumoutier in 1874 and by Gervais in 1876, but it had by then deteriorated to such an extent through faulty preservation that a detailed examination was no longer possible; only the skull remains, in the Musée de l'Homme (Reg. No. 3637).

Two Tasmanian crania were also brought back to France, and are now in the collections of the Musée de l'Homme (Reg. Nos. 3619, 3638).

Dumont D'Urville (1839/40)

Dumont D'Urville paid a second visit to Hobart twelve years after his first, this time with the two vessels *Astrolabe* and *Zélée*. The ships reached Hobart on 12 December 1839, left to explore in antarctic seas on 1 January 1840, returned to Hobart on 17 February and on 25 February sailed from there for New Zealand. There had been much sickness on board the ships and

the visits were largely occupied with tending the sick and with convalescence. As a result, members had little time for excursions, and certainly did not go to Flinders Island where all except a few "tame" natives were living. Among the exceptions were probably two native children attached to Sir John Franklin's household, the girl Mathinna and a boy named Timmy or Adolphus.

The medical staff included Dumoutier, and though very fully occupied with the sick he was sufficiently interested in the natives to make collections. Dumoutier spent a great deal of time during the expedition in modelling busts of the natives he saw at various places visited, and busts of several Tasmanian aborigines are among those brought back by the expedition and now in the Musée de l'Homme. In the official reports it is stated that several busts of Tasmanians were modelled from nature by Dumoutier and two others obtained by purchase. The latter were the well known busts by Law of Trugernanna and Woureddy; but the statement that the others were modelled from nature by Dumoutier is clearly not correct, because one of those portrayed (Mannalargenna) had died about five years earlier, and some at least of the others are likely to have been associated with G. A. Robinson and to have been either with him at Port Phillip or at the Flinders Island settlement at the time of Dumont D'Urville's visit to Hobart. There is pretty clear evidence from Dumoutier's manuscripts that these other busts were in fact copies of some in Sir John Franklin's collection. Great interest was taken in this collection by the visitors; and some of the portraits of the aborigines which Sir John had obtained from Thomas Bock were sketched and their annotations recorded, making it possible to identify with certainty the series of portraits by Bock now in the Pitt Rivers Museum (Oxford) as having belonged to Sir John.

The voyagers also obtained a fine collection of Duterrau's engravings, probably from Duterrau himself as some annotations on them suggest; and they may also have met Thomas Bock, the collection brought back to France having contained a pencil sketch by him of an aboriginal. Four crania were also obtained in Hobart, but only three of these were Tasmanian (Reg. Nos. 973, 4767, 4768), the fourth being that of an Australian aboriginal who had died in the hospital at Hobart (Reg. No. 4766). This Australian aboriginal skull was illustrated in the official publication dealing with the voyage, and designated there as that of a Tasmanian; and was also included by Broca among his measurements of Tasmanian skulls.

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